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ABSTRACT

Developing countries are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that specialized information is essential to their economic and social development, and that it is an indispensable factor in the rational use of natural resources, the development of human resources, scientific and technological advancement, and progress in agriculture, industry, and services. It is to address these needs that Unesco, in close collaboration with its member states, associate members, and international intergovernmental and non- governmental organizations, has drawn up its Medium Term Plan for 1984-1989. This plan comprises 14 major programs, of which the seventh is concerned with information for development. This program is divided into three programs, the first two of which are to be implemenhed by the General Information Programme (PGI). The first aims at the improvement of access to information through the application of new technologies, standardization, and interconnection of information systems. The second aims at the establishment of infrastructures, the development of policies, and the organization of the training required for the processing and dissemination of specialized information. The third program, which is to be implemented by Unesco's Library, Archives, and Documentation Services (LAD), provides for the collection, organization, and presentation of information in Unesco's fields of activity, and its circulation within member states and the secretariat. This report concludes with extensive excerpts from the plan for each of these three programs. (BBM)

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Unesco's General Information Programme for the 80s

Paper by the Unesco Division of the General
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UNESCO'S GENERAL INFORMATION PROGRAMME FOR THE 80'S

It is common knowledge that, for historical, geopolitical and economic reasons, the world is at present divided into information-rich and information-poor countries. This is one of the factors causing the marked world imbalances which are the symptoms of malfunctioning in modern societies.

We are all familiar with the information explosion which has taken place during this century, with its spectacular increase in the production of printed matter every working day, that is, 2 million titles each year, and by 1985, it is estimated that this figure will be four or five times greater : 8 to 10 million scientific and technical documents will be published. This increase in the volume of information has created a need for information storage and distribution systems. During the last ten years, most countries have taken the necessary steps to establish or develop various systems for storing and transferring specialized data.

The acute problem at present is the complexity and volume of information which will undoubtedly grow over the next ten years. Its processing and distribution call for increasingly powerful and sophisticated kinds of technology, which are gradually supplanting traditional processes. Thus, computerized data bases have been set up, especially in industrialized countries. But of the 900 bibliographical and numerical data bases now available on-line internationally, less than one per cent are produced in the developing countries. Access by all nations to the whole range of these data bases, which have become a vital source of information would seem essential to the progress of individual societies and the general advancement of human knowledge.

The information produced by the developing countries as a result of practical activities and research in the socio-economic, scientific and technical fields is poorly organized and only partially covered by data bases in this kind. It is therefore difficult for both national and international users to gain access to it. This information is contained in national publications and journals and in official reports that are generally not included in the various existing data bases. Because of this, both the developing countries and the world community are being deprived of resources that are vitally necessary for a proper understanding of the various problems affecting people's lives and for developing strategies to overcome them.

It is therefore essential that developing countries should be able to use other countries'data bases, as and when they need, and at the same time set up data bases and data banks of their own, at the national and regional levels. A proper organization of their local information would also enable them to become more actively involved in international exchanges of information.

The United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD, Vienna, 1979) and other recent international meetings stressed the importance of stepping up operational assistance to developing countries in order to give them access to a wealth of varied information, and recommended the establishment of a global information network, the structure of which has yet to be determined.

These proposals are the outcome of the wide-ranging deliberations which led to the establishment of the UNISIST Programme. This Programme, launched on 1 January 1973 in accordance with a decision of the General Conference of Unesco, calls for "Co-ordinated and sustained international action to facilitate transfer of scientific and technical information for the economic and social development of nations". In 1979, the UNISIST II Conference expanded the scope of that programme to include all scientific, technological, economic and social information useful for development.

The number of projects for international, regional and subregional information systems and networks is increasing steadily. Unless all these efforts at bibliographical control of information are coordinated, compartmentalization and disorder are likely to result. In the interest of the international community as a whole and in order not to impede the establishment, in accordance with Member States'wishes, of a worldwide network, these systems and networks should be developed in accordance with standardized methodologies that will ensure their compatibility and interconnection. This is another important aspect of PGI's work.

However, setting up the machinery necessary for the transfer of information - services, systems and networks - will not by itself guarantee universal access to information. Many obstacles, not all of them technical, still remain to hinder the freer and more balanced flow and circulation of information throughout the world.

Convenient access to information is a requirement that has long been recognized and Unesco has repeatedly called for the elimination of the linguistic legal, administrative and financial barriers that still impede its flow. The causes of the inequality of access to information sources are not only technical, but also economic, cultural and even political. While this question is of particular importance for the developing countries, it is equally important for the industrialized countries, where there are still many restrictions on the circulation of information both within and between countries.

Among the obstacles preventing convenient access to information is the high cost of the new data processing and telecommunications technologies used for handling information. The poorest developing countries may therefore find themselves unable, without recourse to external aid, to set up the infrastructure necessary for the installation of automated systems and networks. However, the new technologies raise complex legal problems, especially in matters of copyright.

The industrialized countries at present enjoy a kind of de facto monopoly of information, affecting both its substance and the technical means of circulating it. As a result, the transfer of information technologies and of information itself to developing countries may be hindered by restrictive practices, but it may also put developing countries in a position of dependence on privileged suppliers.

The developing countries are not the only ones affected by restrictive practices inhibiting the free flow of information. Such practices are also found in relations between industrialized countries and within individual countries. One can only stress the urgent need to promote practices that are more liberal and in conformity with the general interest, so as to ensure the broadest access possible to all sources of information.

In the wake of the Third World's accession to increased political and economic power, and through the quest for the adjustments thus rendered necessary, the developing countries' information needs have become more apparent. New forms of evaluated information are now requested ; tertiary information designed to meet the demand of specific groups of users is called for ; attention is focused on popularization and liaison services. These countries are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that specialized information is essential to their economic and social development and that it is an indispensable factor in the rational use of natural resources, the development of human resources, scientific and technological advancement, progress in agriculture, industry and services, the blossoming of culture and the enhancement of social well-being. It is because they also recognized this fact that the Member States of Unesco have decided to develop a special programme designed to facilitate access to information.

Unesco considers that the control and use of information depend on the application of a number of basic principles which underlie PGI's strategy of action, namely, a guarantee of ready access to both national and international information for all categories of users ; the systematic elimination of obstacles to the free flow of scientific and technical information ; the availability of all of the normative tools and technical resources required to establish the machinery and create the framework for information processing and distribution, chiefly through the adoption of advanced data processing and telecommunications technology.

This is why the Organization, in close collaboration with its Member States, Associate Members, and International Intergovernmental and Non-Governmental Organizations, has drawn up its Medium Term Plan for 1984-1989. This plan, which was adopted by the General Conference at its 4th Extraordinary Session, held in Paris in December 1982, consists of 14 Major Programmes and a final chapter devoted to Programme Support activities. The Major Programme of concern to us here is the seventh, which addresses the issue of information for development. Its implementation is the responsibility of the Division of the General Information Programme, or PGI, as it is known in Unesco - 'PGI being the acronym of the Division's name in French : Programme général d'information.

The object of PGI's Major Programme is to facilitate general access to information, to promote the free flow of information, and to expand Member States' capacity to exchange, store and use the information needed for their development. With this end in view, particular emphasis is laid on the development of the normative tools required for data processing, the application of new technologies, particularly data processing, the strengthening of national, regional and international information systems and services and their interconnection within a flexible worldwide network.

The Major Programme VII is divided into three programmes. The first aims at the improvement of access to information through the application of new technologies, standardization and interconnection of information systems. It provides for continuation of the efforts already being made to develop the technical and normative methods and tools needed for the establishment of information services and systems. The application of these standards is a prerequisite to the development of compatible systems and for their effective interconnection.

The second programme aims at the establishment of infrastructures, the development of policies and the organization of the training required for the processing and dissemination of specialized information. It provides for the setting up or strengthening of library, archives, documentation, analysis and referral services and numerical and bibliographical data banks, as well as for the organization of training programmes for information specialists and users. This dual approach is essential because it ensures that national resources are organized along efficient lines and thus enables each country to make full use of locally available information and to take advantage of the resources of the various information services and systems available at the regional and international levels.

The third programme, of which the implementation is the responsibility of LAD (Unesco's Library, Archives and Documentation Services), provides for the collection, organization and presentation of information in Unesco's fields of activity and its circulation within Member States and within the Secretariat.

The first programme deals with improvement of access to information, modern technologies, standardization and interconnection of information systems.

"The need to develop all the standards, rules, methods, principles and techniques governing the processing and transfer of specialized information, particularly through the application of modern computer and telecommunication technologies (the conceptual framework of UNISIST), and to apply them to the development of compatible operational information systems is today more crucial than ever.

During the last ten years, there has been a considerable expansion of the application of modern computer and telecommunication technologies to the processing and circulation of specialized information. The automatic processing of scientific and technological information has become widespread, and the methods of interrogating data bases have been refined. The computer storage of information and access in the conversational mode to data bases are currently used by thousands of bodies in the industrialized countries, and the developing countries, on whose behalf special efforts will be made, are also beginning to adopt them. Such applications offer all countries the possibility of access to huge bibliographical and factual data base complexes through connection with the host centre of their choice via international telecommunication networks.

The organization and exchange of data call for greater efforts to create and promote the use of normative tools. Having regard, moreover, to the advances being made in modern technology and their application to the processing and transfer of information, and also to the wishes expressed by Member States, it also seems desirable to give the activities of UNISIST an operational dimension so as to help Member States to establish information systems and services and to offer them the opportunity of mastering standardization techniques and new technologies.

Various technical options are open to countries wishing to apply modern technologies to the use of internationally accessible data bases, e.g. the possibility of using, on their own computers, the magnetic carriers of these bases, selected to suit their own needs, or the possibility of connecting up with transmission networks via host centres, through the use of telematics technology.

These options admittedly involve many difficulties. Initial investment and equipment maintenance costs are considerable. In the case of link-ups, search fees are very high, and a variety of training programmes are required to ensure not only that the computerized and telematics systems introduced function properly but also that they are fully exploited by the users, who must be taught to handle these new procedures. It is also difficult to choose between the very large number of data bases currently available (those accessible in the conversational mode are estimated to number some 900); and, in the case of a connection with a transmission network, agreements often involving difficult negotiations have to be reached with the postal and telecommunications authorities of the countries concerned.

There is a need to encourage, particularly in the developing countries, a movement towards integrated information systems possessing their own data bases and making use of the data bases available internationally. Such an approach would enable these countries to select and organize information according to the needs of their users and to arrive at the position where they can usefully exchange their own data within the various systems.

It is also important to optimize national efforts by establishing at the regional level, and in specific scientific and technological fields, functional links between national systems for the storage and dissemination of information, thereby enabling exchanges of technological information and know-how to take place in accordance with the methods and guidelines laid down by UNISIST.

In 1980, the number of libraries, referral centres, information analysis centres, data banks and other information services and systems set up by 35 organizations of the United Nations system was estimated at over 300. These international information services and systems represent for Member States, and more specifically for the developing countries, a vital source of information to which they can have access without encountering any obstacles of an economic or political nature. They are also important components of any world information network. It is therefore necessary that within the conceptual framework of UNISIST, efforts to ensure the harmonious development and interconnection of these services and systems should be actively pursued and that their efficiency should be improved with a view to a better use in Member States of the information they convey.

Objectives and principles of action

The objectives of this programme are:

to develop standards, rules, methods, guidelines and other normative tools for the processing and transfer of specialized information and the creation of compatible information systems (conceptual framework of UNISIST);

to enable developing countries, individually or on a regional basis, to set up their own data bases and to have access to those now in existence throughout the world, so as to increase the exchange and flow of information through the application of modern technologies and the above-mentioned normative framework;

to promote the development of specialized regional information networks in co-operation with the appropriate international regional organizations and, in particular, the regional economic commissions;

to contribute to the harmonious development of compatible international information services and systems among the organizations of the United Nations system.

The activities planned under this programme will be carried out in co-operation with the relevant international organizations and experts in the fields concerned, with a view to the further development of the necessary normative tools. Particular attention will be paid to the application of modern technologies and to the adaptation and development of information management and retrieval software packages that can be used on various mini- and micro-computers.

In order to establish national data bases and to facilitate access to those already in existence throughout the world, the programme provides for the execution of integrated projects. These projects will be carried out with the active participation of Member States and international and regional organizations and will be financed by the regular programme of Unesco and extra-budgetary funds. They will provide technical assistance (i) for the establishment, in developing countries, of national and/or regional data bases for processing the specialized information produced in those countries, (ii) for the exploitation of data bases already in existence throughout the world, (iii) for the establishment of linkages with host centres, and (iv) for the local processing of these bases. The fields covered by these projects will be defined in co-operation with Member States in such a way as to take account of the activities carried out under major programme VI (The sciences and their applications to development).

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The integrated projects can be regarded as steps on the road leading to the establishment of a flexible international network of compatible information systems and services. These projects will make it possible not only to apply the UNISIST standards and methods, but also to implement, in national and regional contexts, various pilot activities and other actions planned under programme 2 (Infrastructures, policies and training required for the processing and dissemination of specialized information). The design of the systems envisaged will therefore take account not only of technical and normative aspects but also of institutional and human factors that are also necessary for guaranteeing access to information and its full use.

Co-operation with appropriate regional and international organizations will aim at establishing co-operative regional networks for the processing, storage and exchange of scientific and technological information based on existing national services and systems and incorporating the integrated projects referred to above. On a much wider scale, co-operation with the organizations of the United Nations system will aim to encourage the adoption, by their various information services and systems, of the standards and methods developed within the framework of UNISIST so as to ensure their compatible development and interconnection. Unesco will continue to participate actively in the work of the various inter-institutional mechanisms established for this purpose, as it has done within the framework of the Inter-Organization Board for Information Systems (IOB).

Subprogrammes

The activities carried out under this programme will be divided into three subprogrammes.

The first subprogramme, Development of tools for the processing and transfer of information, has as its aim to develop, establish and make available the technical and normative tools required for the design and operation of compatible information systems and services.

The second subprogramme, Development and use of data bases through the application of modern technologies and normative tools, is centred on the implementation of national and regional integrated projects for the development of national and/or regional data bases and the use of internationally available data bases, so as to make possible their gradual interconnection in regional and international information systems.

The third subprogramme, Exchange and flow of information; regional and international co-operation among Member States and with the organizations of the United Nations system, is intended to contribute to the establishment of regional and international networks and to promote their compatibility and interconnection. In collaboration with appropriate regional and international organizations and through suitable inter-institutional machinery, it will also include activities to bring about harmonization and co-ordination in the information field." *

The second Programme concerns the development of infrastructures, policies and training required for the processing and dissemination of specialized information.

" The processing of information involves a succession of varied and complex operations such as storage, sorting, evaluation, analysis and synthesis of data, and retrieval of information likely to meet specific, ever-changing needs. The needs vary according to the field of learning involved, the present state of knowledge, the type of user and the aims pursued, but they are all based on one prerequisite, namely that the information received should be reliable, up to date and immediately available.

The processing operations as a whole are arranged in a logical sequence known as the 'documentary chain'. However, the various documentary functions are not necessarily performed by the same body. On the contrary, there is at present a constant diversification of information processing bodies, according to the part of the documentary chain they are particularly concerned with--and the proliferation of the terms used to designate them--national university, public and school libraries, archives, specialized libraries, documentation centres or services, analysis centres or services, liaison

* Excerpted from : Unesco. Second Medium Term Plan (1984-1989), Paris, 1983, pp. 160 et seq.

services, data bases, resource libraries, referral services, data compilation services, etc.--reflects the complexity and magnitude of the basic infrastructure with which nations must equip themselves. It is important to keep in view when introducing modern information technologies that there are services that might in parallel appropriately be performed by traditional information handling processes in libraries, archives and documentation services.

Among the various information processing units, there is currently growing interest in the so-called 'tertiary' information services whose function is to provide rapid and reliable answers to highly specialized questions by supplying selected, verified and evaluated information presented in various authoritative forms, e.g. balance-sheets, syntheses, trend studies, etc. These services are complemented by referral, exchange and liaison services, whose function is to direct users to sources of information relevant to their particular field of activity. These 'tertiary' services have expanded considerably in the industrialized countries during the last ten years and their establishment in the developing countries should be encouraged.

Apart from this functional distinction, the various information units can also be differentiated by the areas of knowledge they cover and the categories of user they serve. Information requirements for development depend on the particular branches of activity and/or specialities (pure sciences, technologies, administration, agriculture, industry) concerned, the objective for which the information is sought (research, development, management, production, services), and on the level of training and responsibility of the users (scientists, technicians, planners, managers, ordinary personnel, workers, students). These information units must also provide the general public with information that contributes to development of the individual, better control of the environment and the participation of social groups in economic life. The special information needs of such groups as handicapped users, including the blind, and newly literate populations in rural areas must be kept in mind.

The information requirements of individuals, research centres, enterprises and government departments taken together, constitute an overall national information requirement and if this is not fully met, the country's development may even be compromised. This risk is all the greater for the developing countries, which must undertake new activities. The problem is therefore to ensure that the information requirements of a country--or at least its priority requirements--are met as far as possible by constantly using the resources available in the most economical and efficient way. There is thus a clear need to set up national information systems that will guarantee harmonious operation and optimal use of all the facilities for the storage, processing and dissemination of specialized information.

The complexity and variety of information processing facilities, the complementarity of their functions, the scale of investment they require, the size of the obstacles--political, legal, financial, human and economic--which they must overcome, the increasing variety of users and of their needs and the need to meet the priority information requirements defined by each country--all these factors indicate the need for a rationalization of national efforts, within the framework of a clear policy of co-ordination.

It is therefore necessary to encourage, in the Member States, the establishment of an information policy that is in harmony with the national development policy. Thus a vital role devolves upon suitable national bodies or 'focal points', which, starting from a sound assessment of the expressed or latent needs and their degree of priority, are called upon to co-ordinate, encourage, create, or strengthen suitable services and systems, to conduct a continuing evaluation of the capacity of these services and systems to meet requirements, and to see that they participate effectively in the regional and international information systems and networks.

The diversification of the services provided for users and the increasing application of computer and telecommunications technology to the storage, processing and dissemination of information, create a need for suitable training programmes, both for professionals in the information field and for users. The kinds of occupation involved are tending to become increasingly varied and are sometimes ill-defined. These occupations include those of analyst, indexer, cataloguer, computer specialist, information distributor, systems designer, general personnel, technician, liaison specialist and consultant documentalist, specialized functions which complement and enhance the traditional occupations of librarian and archivist. New qualifications are required--in computer science and management, and in the field or specialized subject with which the information being processed is concerned. There is, indeed, an increasing tendency to require of information specialists a dual qualification, in documentary techniques and in the field or subject he deals with, and to require him to attend refresher courses which enable him to update or to renew his knowledge. There also appears to be a need to familiarize users with the basic documentary techniques and with modern means of information processing, so as to encourage them to make full use of the systems available to them. Taken together, these training activities help to bring about conditions conducive to a fruitful dialogue between information specialists and the users of information--which alone can ensure that the services provided are continuously adapted to changing needs.

Objectives and principles of action

The objectives of this programme are to help Member States:

to set up national information systems and to improve the various components of these systems (libraries, archives, documentary services, information analysis centres, referral centres, numerical data banks, etc.);

to expand their capacity to co-ordinate activities in all sectors of specialized information and to formulate development policies and plans in this field;

to train information specialists and to develop the national and regional potential for practical and theoretical instruction and training in the information sciences, library science and archives administration.

This programme is consistent with the principles of action underlying the conception of the integrated projects proposed in the framework of Programme 1 (subprogramme 2: Development and use of data bases through the application of modern technologies and normative tools). However, the approach to the problems posed and the means of action are different. Programme 1 involves using new information technologies and tested and standardized methods for the purpose of setting up compatible specialized systems, taking into account all the complementary elements--institutional, human and financial--necessary for the success of such an undertaking; all this with the overall operational objective of systems interconnection.

The present programme is concerned with the various aspects of developing the capacity for the storage, processing and circulation of specialized information, with all the various facilities this requires. This calls mainly for: preparing conceptual studies which would be applicable in various contexts; carrying out pilot projects concerning particular problems; providing Member States with the expert advice they request for the execution of specific projects; and encouraging exchange of experience in the formulation of policies and plans and in setting up national information systems and personnel training systems.

Subprogrammes

The activities to be carried out under this programme will be divided into two subprogrammes.

The first subprogramme, National information policies and infrastructures, will seek, firstly, to make decision-makers, and particularly those in the developing countries, aware of the need to develop national information policies and to plan integrated systems which are in keeping with national development policies and, secondly, to reinforce at national level the various specialized information processing services. In this connection, particular attention will be given to consolidating national information focal points and national committees for UNISIST, to establishing services for information analysis and synthesis, to improving the methods of document conservation, especially in tropical and subtropical regions, to developing the activities of the Records and Archives Management Programme (RAMP) and to improving access to documents through implementation of the recommendations of the International Congress on Universal Availability of Publications (UAP).

The second subprogramme, Training of information personnel and information users, will seek to promote the implementation in Member States of plans for theoretical and practical training and the development of suitable teaching materials; to encourage the organization of basic instruction courses and of special international programmes for teachers, information service administrators and high-level specialists; and to foster and guide the organization of training activities for various categories of users in different disciplines." *

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* Excerpted from : Unesco. Second Medium Term Plan (1984-1989), Paris, 1983, pp. 160 et seq.

The Third Programme, Unesco information and documentation systems and services, is the responsibility of LAD, Unesco's Division of Library, Archives and Documentation Services.

" Unesco has always attached particular importance to the collection and international exchange of information within its fields of competence. As a result, various factual and bibliographical information services and systems covering education, the natural sciences, the social sciences, culture and communication have been developed and established within the Organization. In addition, automated documentation services and library and archive services provide information on the programme and activities of the Organization, as they appear in its documentation, for specialists from the Secretariat and Member States (permanent delegations, National Commissions, governmental bodies, universities and research centres). Several years ago Unesco developed the CDS/ISIS-CAN/SDI documentary software package in order to process its own document collection and to form a basis for the development of its specialized information systems. Some institutions in Member States, as well as certain international bodies, have since made use of this software package.

Since 1972, the use of computers for the systematic processing of the bulk of the documentation produced by the Organization, its regional offices and its affiliated institutions has made possible the establishment of a data base which reflects the wide range of Unesco's activities during the last ten years (1972-1982).

In addition, the computerization of the bibliographic records of the Organization's various information units is now under way and this will make it possible to compile a register of the external documentation received through donations, exchanges or acquisitions. This operation has two objectives: firstly, to facilitate the search for and retrieval of documents and information available within Unesco and improve access to them and, secondly, to rationalize the resources of the central library, the sectoral documentation centres and the regional offices and affiliated institutes, and to standardize documentary techniques and procedures.

The international information services and systems established by Unesco, like the various specialized services and systems developed by the other organizations of the United Nations system, are important parts of a future world information network (cf. Programme 1: Improvement of access to information: modern technologies, standardization and interconnection of information systems). They should therefore be improved and expanded by making them compatible, thus making it easier for Member States to participate in information processing and exchange activities. " *

The work of PGI is financed from a variety of sources : the Unesco Regular Programme budget, the Participation Programme, development banks, the United Nations Financing System for Science and Technology for Development, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and funds obtained under Funds-in-Trust agreements. Its total budget from all sources for the current biennium (1986-1987) is approximately US $ 16 million, and this, unfortunately, is not commensurate with the needs of developing countries.

An Intergovernmental Council of 30 members, elected by the General Conference of Unesco guide the design and planning of PGI's Programme.

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* Excerpted from : Unesco. Second Medium Term Plan (1984-1989), Paris, 1983, pp. 160 et seq.

In brief, the primary role of PGI is to act as a catalyst in promoting and co-ordinating action to improve the provision and use of information throughout the world. It performs this role through consultation and collaboration with a variety of organizations including Unesco Programmes, Member States, the United Nations and its agencies, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and individual information specialists.